

Message Text

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47

ACTION EA-09

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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2520

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

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SUBJ: GOM STATEMENTS ON US ROLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 732 (DTG 100332Z FEB 76)

SINGAPORE 622 (DTG 070541Z FEB 76)

1. SUMMARY: RECENT STATEMENTS BY BOTH THE LATE PRIME MINISTER RAZAK AND THE NEW PRIME MINISTER, DATUK HUSSEIN ONN, WELCOME A CONTINUED U.S. ECONOMIC AND DIPLOMATIC ROLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. ALTHOUGH SUBSTANCE OF STATEMENT IS NOT REMARKABLE, EXPLICIT APPROVAL OF A CONTINUING U.S. ROLE IN THE AREA FROM SUCH A SENIOR LEVEL IS UNUSUAL.

END SUMMARY.

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2. FOR THE RECORD, THE EMBASSY WISHES TO AMPLIFY BACKGROUND OF PRIME MINISTER HUSSEIN ONN'S STATEMENTS ON THE U.S. ROLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA MADE AT HIS PRESS CONFERENCE IN SINGAPORE FEB 6 AND REPORTED BY K.L. AND EMBASSY SINGAPORE (REFTELS.). THIS CONFERENCE WAS GIVEN ALMOST FULL COVERAGE ON SINGAPORE TV -- WHERE IT WAS WATCHED BY SINGAPORE'S DCM AND K.L.'S POLITICAL SECTION CHIEF -- BUT ONLY EXCERPTED IN MALAYSIA. ONE REASON FOR THE RELATIVELY LIGHT COVERAGE WAS THAT WHILE DATUK HUSSEIN WAS RELAXED AND FORTHCOMING WITH THE PRESS, HE SEEMED NOT TO HAVE BEEN CAREFULLY BRIEFED. THEREFORE, ONE GOT THE IMPRESSION OF AN HONEST, STRAIGHTFORWARD MAN WHO WAS FORCED TO RESORT TO CIRCUMLOCUTION BECAUSE HE HAD BEEN WARNED WHAT NOT RPT NOT TO SAY, BUT HAD NOT BEEN TOLD WHAT HE COULD SAY. ACCORDING TO ONE SENIOR EMBASSY SOURCE IN THE MFA, THE PRESS CONFERENCE WAS CONSIDERED A SUCCESS BY DATUK HUSSEIN'S OWN STAFF, BUT NOT BY SOME IN MFA. (IN OUR VIEW, HOWEVER, DESPITE SOME INITIAL PROBLEMS GOM CREDIBILITY WOULD BE ENHANCED IF HUSSEIN CONTINUES TO HOLD PRESS CONFERENCES REGULARLY, IN CONTRAST TO HIS PRACTICE IN RECENT YEARS OF LIMITING HIS PRESS CONTACTS.)

3. IN THIS REGARD, IT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE ANY MALAYSIAN PRIME MINISTER HAS REFERRED DIRECTLY TO THE AMERICAN ROLE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. IN HIS SINGAPORE PRESS CONFERENCE, DATUK HUSSEIN WAS ASKED BY A WESTERN CORRESPONDENT WHETHER HE AGREED WITH A STATEMENT BY TUN RAZAK PRINTED IN THE FEB 6 EDITION OF THE NEW HONG KONG NEWS MAGAZINE "ASIAWEEK" THAT MALAYSIA WELCOMES A CONTINUED U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. HE REPLIED, AS QUOTED PARA 8 SECOND REFTTEL, "U.S. INVOLVEMENT PER SE IS NEVER HARMFUL, BUT WHAT KIND OF INVOLVEMENT DO THE AMERICANS WANT?" MALAYSIA VALUES THE U.S. PRESENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, HE CONTINUED, BUT FEELS THAT IT SHOULD BE A LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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DIPLOMATIC AND ECONOMIC PRESENCE, INFERRING THAT THE GOM DOES NOT FAVOR A SECURITY ROLE FOR THE U.S.

4. DATUK HUSSEIN'S REPLY IS IN LINE WITH THE WRITTEN INTERVIEW IN "ASIAWEEK" WHICH, AN MFA SOURCE HAS EXPLAINED, THE LATE PRIME MINISTER HAD WORKED ON WITH THE MFA AND APPROVED BEFORE HIS DEATH. THE INTERVIEW CONSISTED OF REPLIES TO THREE QUESTIONS.

THE FIRST ASKED HOW NEWLY-CEMENTED US-PRC RELATIONS WOULD EFFECT SOUTHEAST ASIA GENERALLY. RAZAK'S REPLY WELCOMED THE GRADUAL REMOVAL OF THE DESTABLIZING FACTOR OF SINO-US HOSTILITY AND NOTED THAT COUNTRIES IN THE AREA NO LONGER NEED BE CALLED UPON TO TAKE SIDES IN DISPUTES WHICH DO NOT DIRECTLY CONCERN THEM. HE ALSO NOTED THAT CHINA AND U.S. ARE NOT THE ONLY EXTERNAL FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED AND WARNED THAT THE REGION MUST BE ON GUARD AGAINST INTRUSION OF HOSTILITIES INVOLVING OTHER POWERS, CITING SPECIFICALLY THE SINO-SOVIET CONFLICT.

5. THE SECOND QUESTION ASSERTED THAT PRESIDENT FORD'S VISIT TO SOUTHEAST ASIA AFTER PEKING WAS "KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN AN EXPRESSION OF DISPLEASURE AT CHINA'S CRITICISM OF DETENTE," AND ASKED WHETHER THIS DID NOT IMPLY THAT THE REGION REMAINS A "CONVENIENCE" IN BIG-POWER POLITICS. IMPLICITLY REJECTING THE LEAD IN TO THE QUESTION, TUN RAZAK'S ANSWER SAID THAT HE ASSUMED THE PRESIDENT'S VISITS WERE TO REAFFIRM U.S. TIES WITH THE PHILIPPINES AND INDONESIA AND TO DEMONSTRATE A CONTINUING U.S. INTEREST AND INVOLVEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN AFFAIRS, WHICH HE TERMED "A GOOD THING" BECAUSE THERE IS MUCH THE U.S. CAN DO, PARTICULARLY IN THE ECONOMIC, TRADE, AND DEVELOPMENT FIELDS AS WELL AS THROUGH "JUDICIOUS" DIPLOMATIC SUPPORT.

6. THIRD QUESTION ASKED WHAT THE COUNTRIES IN REGION COULD EXPECT FROM THE U.S. POST-VIETNAM. IN REPLY, RAZAK STRESSED THE OPPORTUNITY THE U.S., WITH ITS FRIENDLY RELATIONS WITH BOTH CHINA AND LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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SOUTHEAST ASIA, HAS TO SERVE AS A BRIDGE FOR COMMUNICATION TO OVERCOME MUTUAL MISUNDERSTANDING OF MISPERCEPTIONS. HE CONCLUDED BY STATING: "IN THE CURRENT FLUID SITUATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, THIS IS NOT AN INCONSIDERABLE ROLE. A RENEWED DEMONSTRATION OF CONTINUING U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, I REPEAT, IS WELCOME." (FULL TEXT OF "ASIA WEEK" STATEMENTS BEING SUBMITTED TO DEPT, CINCPAC AND HONG KONG BY AIRGRAM NO. 22 DATED FEB 24, 1976.) UNDERHILL

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